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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

CHIMAERA LIPS

BY

SUZETTE MAYR



A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND
RESEARCH IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

FALL 1992



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Suzette Mayr

3217 Elbow Dr. SW

Calgary, Alberta

T2S 2J4

25 September 1992

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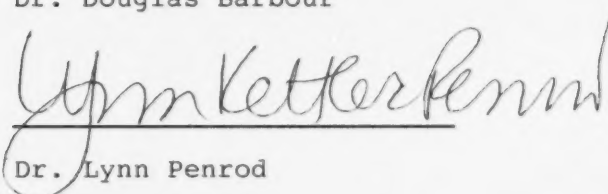
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH.



Dr. Janice Williamson



Dr. Douglas Barbour



Dr. Lynn Penrod

Date: 30 July 1992

To my family

ABSTRACT

Chimaera Lips is an auto-fictive, written exploration of the middle spaces or "borderlines" between the binaries that determine perceptions of race, sex and gender within patriarchal discourse. Through genre-blurring and poetic images that emphasize middle spaces rather than binarial extremes, this thesis uses language as an investigative medium to explore the links between form, voice and "identity," as well as challenge the binaries that sustain racism, sexism and homophobia.

The female voices in the texts of *Chimaera Lips* inhabit the spaces between races as multiracial people (specifically Black and White European) and the texts illustrate the differences between voices whose points of commonality are biological sex and racial heritage; too often people belonging to a marginalised group are defined solely by their membership to that group. In these texts, women are discovered among "Woman" and individuals are distinguished from their race.

The prose and poetry genres are mixed and adapted in order to reflect the material covered in the thesis. The texts are divided into four sections--each section covering different aspects of, and connections between, the politics of race and racism, as well as sex and sexuality.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. I am embarrassed by the sounds my body makes.....	2
Touching this page might mean.....	3
Nuit noire.....	4
Across oceans.....	5
A perfect J.....	6
For U. M.....	8
The hair is the repository of the soul: Sibling 2....	13
The hair is the repository of the soul: Sibling 3....	14
Wash Day.....	15
2. Nipple Gossip.....	18
Maidens.....	19
Hymen Legends.....	20
Water Sports.....	24
Dancing Lessons.....	27
Understand.....	30
Skinned.....	31
3. Eating my mother's country.....	32
Tourist.....	33
Tourist: Parents' last words.....	36
Duff Cake.....	37
Conch Pizza.....	39
Bahamas '92.....	41
1. Colour Blindness.....	41
2. An albino pit bull lives next door.....	43
3. Skin fruit.....	44

4. Colour Blind.....	45
5. Hair Politics.....	48
6. Her skin prickles snow.....	50
4. Scalps.....	51
Afterword.....	58
Works Consulted.....	67

Chimaera: A Lycian Monster. The Chimaera was one of a grim brood spawned by Typhaon and Echidna that included the Hydra, Cerberus, and the hound Orthus. She has been variously described as having either three heads--those of a lion, of a goat, and of a snake--or the front parts of a lion, the middle of a goat, and a snake's tail; or all of these peculiarities at once. All accounts agree that she breathed fire.

--Edward Tripp

*The Meridian Handbook of
Classical Mythology*

1. I am embarrassed by the sounds my body makes

Touching this page might mean

a yell

a burp

a fart

a sphincter whiiine

deep breath lifts expands her rib cage

spreads apart the bones x-ray vision

final lift gondola-like swing of her ribs (unbarbecued)

her chest into

tonsils sproing to the floor

knuckles whip crack

dandruff flakes and whispers

She runs fingernails across

chalkboard blackboard whiteboard

bloodboard

shrieeks metal across concrete

slops wet bread onto windshields

drops a striped feather into a pool

This page. This body. This beginning.

Nuit noire

She breathes too loudly in her sleep
grinds her teeth
chatters fusses walks and screams
regular nights she just

breathes

Desperate she makes her bed under the basement floor. Tells
the neighbours

oh it's just the house settling

Across oceans

A grandfather flower-potted in a German grave yard around
his plot is blotting paper for steel wool tears. Next door
is the war monument. Another the other his brother
grandfather ours this time is unpotted and scattered by
shell and shrapnel. He is grass this monument is made of
grass our grandmother nightly makes love to grass.

Another the other grandmother also made of grass but also
sand and the sun that slaps the faces of blind white
tourists. Blood stains slave-hewn steps the kiss of palm
tree ocean. Tropical ferns grow from concrete and empty
vodka bottles. Stone chews through our/that family's blood.

Two mixed.

Too violent.

A perfect J

Really mum would never allow herself on paper

(Mother sits at the kitchen table reads
the paper-coloured palm of my hand,
"Jesus," she says, "Jesus Christ," she
says. Her eyes exasperated roll up so
high so white they pop slip out and
splash into my bowl of cereal of milk.
Caressed and blotted dry in the flannel
spine of my little black book. I
scribble her eyeballs scribble them
more. She hears and sees her words
scribbled and bent: "Would you cut that
out," she says, "cut that out.")

Mum's bikinied upper torso a sans-serif J arms flung up so
high so brown a photo taken by my father a photo taken by

me

out of a drawer

not my own

Mother's limbs the colour silhouette the
sun makes her his photo the only paper
that holds her down.

Twenty-four she is and nowhere in sight
am I.

I eat cereal and milk out of thick china bowls stolen from
restaurants write with pens stolen from hotels this stolen
morning my face an upside-down egg rimmed in the bowl of a
licked clean cereal spoon.

I am twenty-four. A cereal spoon in sight.

("Give those bloody well back," she
says, my face a milk-streaked egg her
stolen eyes roll in my spoon held close
to my lips.

The last word.)

For U. M.

Once, my father told me what I needed to know through food:

A small dish of fried worms. Just the right size for a three year old the year everything happened my ears pierced first tricycle first real toy a squeaky Mickey Mouse birth of my brothers the first time I realized that brushed hair mattered. First love. Her name was Barbara. She lived on Sesame Street

Chocolate-covered ants. One can. Bought from Woodward's special foods section next to the fried grasshoppers and pickled maggots snuck in while my mother was complaining over egg sizes. She was wearing a leather micro-mini and paisley tights

Bacon grease on bread. For lunch after breakfast before soap suds. Had to be rye bread & had to have salt sprinkles lean up against the kitchen table watched him spread grease on thick slices. Hand one slice to my brother one to me. Couldn't get enough never got enough

Bone marrow. Consistency of snot but still fought over who got the biggest gob. Raged as he slid the last of the meat jelly down his throat. I threw my napkin to the floor and stomped

Then, my body began to reject him:

Pistachio nuts. One full bag puked up in the back of the Volkswagen. Smile wide mouth turned acid pink from pistachio dye acid whiff of baby brother's diaper

Red River cereal. Tastes like bird seed and looks like it. My guts constipation-seized eat it only when there's nothing else or when I want to borrow a lot of money

Dry salami. Hives and bad breath skin red sore inflamed eczema screams across my back along the backs of my knees bends in my elbows. Sores pour tears

Sashimi. Diarrhea that burned my ass out an artificially enlarged anus still smoking and fish looking out they wonder where's the fire?

Bone marrow. But what would my friends say?

So, we tried communicating through fabrics:

Dark green sweater. Thick scratchy wool had a V-neck
sometimes wore it with a shirt sometimes not didn't matter
anyway when you have no breasts to speak of but want them
badly oh so badly

Winter parka. "If you're cold you're either poor or stupid
and we're not poor." Hang around in minus thirty warm as
twice re-heated gravy but no boyfriends to speak of didn't
matter anyway the ones I really liked only lived on
television

Paisley night shirt. No ruffles elastics itch of pink
flowers and ribbons just buttons buttons buttons

Winter gloves. Borrowed the striped ones and never gave them
back.

Then, one day, his clothes began to reject me:

My bras and panties, his jockey shorts. He laughed at the flowers on my underwear I cut them off and sewed them on to his underwear we laughed at his embarrassment in the locker room. Mother thought it was unnatural. She was folding clothes when she pointed this out she wore her green house coat the one she had on to wait for me when I came home late smelling of dried and drying sperm

One light blue sweater vest. Paper-scissored a hole in the front a wrinkle cut between his eyebrows the blood-hammering echoes of yelling yelling and yelling.

I would have to find my own clothes
trap my legs in mini-skirts frame
my neck in shoulder pads. He
suggests that maybe I should change
my hair style; get more dates that
way.

Too old for objects maybe and our bodies so so far away.
Into my hand he tucks a stone ammonite-embedded

hiss click of his knitting needles frames the book
I am reading rub polished animal between my
fingers rub smooth amulet charm cool against my
cheek silence of the stone his fingers moving over
wool and needles blue air of pipe smoke coils kiss
his cheek his face tucked in the space between
neck and shoulder for a second just a second beard
bristles ammonite rubbed between thumb and fingers
so so far away

The hair is the repository of the soul: Sibling 2

His name splashes sweet fresh water onto burning pavement.
Straight fresh hair in ringlets touches his burning
forehead.

I'll have a number 2 on the
sides and a number 3 on the
top a 2 on the sides and a 3
on the top (this is to Stella
the lady at the black hair
salon. It's black hair even if
it's feathered red and green-
eyed.)

A number 2 is like seal skin. Relaxed, they call it. Dead
straight, I call it. A number 3 is almost his own hair only
so short so thin it whispers burnt scalp. Goes too well with
his thin, clamped lips.

*

The penis is the repository of the soul: Sibling 3

Another the other his brother my brother goes after fat
women blonde women all of them white women. They like his
black man charm and the mythical inside of his pants that
his lips promise. Thick and pushy.

Straight clamped lips and a small white dink books by their
covers the muted hellos of mulattoed zeebras.

*

Wash Day

No one can touch us. We go through the motions
sweet sexual motions
record the number of soiled breaths
stained blue-eyed kisses
talk and roll them naked and open into the laundry room
on wash day

Sibling 2 folds a striped pair of socks:

She gave him a daisy at work yesterday.

Sibling I unloads the dryer:

That's sweet. And does he like her too? (*what colour is
she?*)

Sibling 2:

Yeah. (*white, of course*) But not as much as she says
she likes him. (*only goes after black men he's found
out*) (*she has chocolate stains around her mouth and on
her clothes*)

Sibling I smiles and adds more bleach to the rinse cycle:

She won't be around long.

We go through partners like socks

the backdrop is
clamp-lipped pink parents, women who love coloured men, men
who love coloured women

spin through the motions
launder the stains
scrub and talk fingertips raw

We can never leave each other. Siblings have to stick and
scrub laugh without spinning too dry at the slash splash
between either/or

think white or be black
in the laundry room be a multi-
coloured three-dimensional tonguing
twisted

you

laugh so hard you start to spin. Laugh so hard you can't
spin anymore giggle with inter-racial lips snicker with
zebra-striped skins

open mouths funnelled caves and teeth chewing knives

we sing and scrub socks
add bleach and blistering hot water
watch soiled hearts sucked away:

hang our socks
from the line
by the necks
to dry

2. Nipple Gossip

Maidens

sometimes she wishes she were a virgin again
could hear and know the silence of her body
a silence now always hymen-broken

lick away the desperate
click of rotating Pills
bubbles of yeast infect
ed bath water itch to the
surface

(but only a virgin who's been there settled her tab gotten
tough metal cleats hammered onto the heels of her shoes and
whose nipples know how to gossip

Hymen Legends

Her mother said that when a woman's hymen breaks, she screams like a horse.

Naturally, when she heard this animal cruelty, she ran, terrified, from the room. Left the door open behind her.

Rewind. Now slow motion replay: Open Door. Warning.

*

Bed a sheeted stage aware of profiles shifts her body
trickily keep the fat on the other side of the bed far away
so he won't see it worries about the shape of her breasts
 didn't eat so her stomach would be flat hopes it won't
growl too loudly.

Self-conscious, she waits

for legendary pain everyone's
warned her about cat's penises
their bristles yowling hemorrhages
hospital smears spatters of blood
shreds of female membrane trail
from her body drag along the floor
the echoing shriek of banshees
final scream as the hymen-horse
wrestles, spermicide flecked along
its sides, to its death

digital clock simmers red

squeak squirks of his second-hand bed

a yawn a hum skull boredom she can't help it she's bored

where's the lightning the tiara the trip for two

Neighbours below
bang on their
ceiling. Shout:
NOT ENOUGH NOISE!

her stomach growls irritated. Rewind, now slow motion
replay:
Open Door.
Her door was already open.

What does this mean?:

her body's non-response
package opened when she wasn't looking
was her hymen stolen (now she'll never get to scream) does
this mean she never was a virgin will never get married
is sterile never fall in or out of love maybe she's a man
has she really had sex did she have sex and forget
where's the blood without blood she can't prove it what
would her mother think mother who says scream like a
horse?

Bodyparts and womanhood: stares at her naked
mirrored self mouths out the words (can you
read lips? she doesn't know whose lips she's
reading anymore): Whose body is this anyway?

she never had a hymen. Never screamed like a horse, nor did she:

die. Membranes torn and dragging
bleed. From the eyes or mouth
wake up. The neighbours
fall in or out of love: isn't it the first one who's
supposed to be the most important? she's forgotten what he
looks like already.

Womanhood and bodyparts: she unzips herself along her
calloused toes hairy ankles and shaved calves, pimply knees
magical expanding thighs no hymen and hairy belly, uneven
breasts collar bone lips faint moustache nose forehead and
finally her special occasion straightened hair

She unzips. Steps out of her body and leaves, fed up, on the
next train out. Doesn't care if she's shut the door or not.

Water Sports

Once I find a bank to wash my own river up against
then

I can play his game

then fold then tuck into my deepest darkest drawer
the spectacle (adjust the focus please) of me naked (that
bra is lost forever) rolling across knee-burning floor
(never made it to the bed. Sorry) play his game of

go with the flow (but now just)

water under the bridge.

Go with the flow he always said (but only if it's my flow my
waves my drowning current my water my bridge he should have
said). Now he is busy gushing more water further upstream.

His flow his water his bridge

I grasp

freezing steel bridge cables

my toes

just skim the asphalt

soft pink tongue wet vulva lips
clamped to frozen metal supports

skin tear asphalt bumps and
potholes smooth surfaces tear bones
out of elbows knees where belly
meets hips fine gravel (kiss kiss)
still sticks to skin on my cheeks

Water under the bridge.

I have always been afraid of dying particularly by water
stones ground smooth under current thrust
teeth flex fish jaws and tangled garbage drowns

muggy candle flicker of the porthole
making fuck under his basement window
(a soaked
kiss kiss)

Once I can find a bank to wash my own river up against then
I can open him up and remember slide on a rubber suit hip-
high wading boots a really big stick fingers clench
bloodless dried

remember water beetle brown arms
mating submarines jammed under bridges

unstick my vulva's tongue

Dancing Lessons

She is obsessed.

She now considers all women with Fiancee's particular hairstyle beautiful and especially gifted.

She listens to music now that she never would have listened to before.

She takes dancing lessons because the first time she saw Fiancee was in a dance show dancing to that music. Fiancee was wearing black spandex shorts and a black suit jacket. Her feet were in Doc Martens.

She considers Doc Martens beautiful now but definitely not for her own bunioned feet.

She finally met Fiancee face to face after she spent the afternoon drunk with Fiancee's fiance fucking under a tree in the park. She blushed red as hot coals at the thought of fiance's condoms shrivelled in her purse, the gravel in her panties the size of Fiancee's engagement diamond.

She was in love with the fiance and now she is in love with Fiancee:

Here is what she would love to say:

I've always thought you were a terrific dancer.
I've always wanted to tell you that. (She giggles
then trembles because she knows already what the
answer will be)

Fiancee: Who are you?

Which she could not answer.

Her only choice then would be body language. Buy herself
Docs and spandex shorts; her own body lumpy next to
Fiancee's lean diamond one. And if Fiancee knew the truth oh
if she knew the truth.

Fiancee's fiance told her before she let him in
before he found his way inside her that Fiancee
had once done him a swift uppercut to the gut for
coming in late one night. Fiancee had been worried
and this had been her pulsing Valentine. He
proposed to her as soon as his wind coughed back.

She would cherish an uppercut or any other kind of flower.
But not really. Not if it hurt.
She wishes now it hadn't happened behind Fiancee's back. But
still this lets her in to Fiancee and she is glad she is
glad.

She was in love with Fiancee minus an e. Now she dreams of the whole. The painful whole.

Her belly flesh enveloped around Fiancee's fist. She could absorb it, let Fiancee inside her. It's the only way she knows how. (the diamond that grows from her hand makes surviving Fiancee's punch a feat quite impossible. True it could be loved and softened if she talked fast enough but a belly is only a belly. A rock, on either hand, is always a rock)

Instead of loving Fiancee which would be the natural thing to do she takes lessons and under that tree that fucking tree begins to dance herself to death in Doc Marten's loving red-hot shoes.

She can't dance though so please excuse her while she grunts and shuffles. Her diamond dance.

Understand

Under

stand stand

under look up her skirt from below through a
staircase look up under her skirt and maybe you'll
understand what it is you're looking for what it
is you want understand her understand that there
never were never will be and never are any tan
stripes. Too bad.

There is a song she listens to about growing up good-looking
and white in the time before people died of venus diseases
it's about a one night stand (Remember: under. Find what
you're looking for) it's happy it bounces. Her name is
"Lady." His name is "Never Gonna." When she dances she
closes her eyes raises her arms from the elbows her knees
sink together mermaid shape and her hair bounces back and
forth back and forth back and forth like a pony. Mermaid
shape. No legs. Nothing between them then don't you see you
understand. Lady and Never Gonna play their venus games to a
syncopated drum beat their bodies clamp belly-to-belly like
slugs for hours for hours for hours. Belly-to-belly they
stripe each other bleached slug stomachs she dreams of
stripes her own body one belly unstriped.

Skinned

his fingers prod
lick in corners

my teeth gnaw
hungry chew him dry

under his fingers his mouth full of me
he says the colour of my skin doesn't matter

(Words whisper knives and kisses:

he sighs and tears my skin off orange rind
cups peeled and spilling breasts

(penetrating blood and meat he
tongues dissected lips

skin that doesn't matter cools bleeds
composts

3. Eating my mother's country

Tourist

Remember that kaffee

klatsch with my aunt the

bitter coffee

out of white on white smooth

china cups

(where is my grandmother my *oma* the bloody reason I am
here?)

china shards glide down my throat

coffee beans sting black

*

shopping downtown Herborn absorb the stares of natives and
scenery

cobble-stones hazel nut bushes eyes of people slide slide
sliding my way

"they're just curious," my
parents say, "just curious." I
think of curio cabinets

avoid the footsteps of girls my age *they're just curious*
walk in & among the stones *just curious* toes of their shoes
kick my heels *just* being followed I am being followed

curious they run away laugh
mouths glint sharp white fluoride teeth
white-tipped nails

does *oma* understand the skin-
coloured slash between
either/or? a cobble-stoned
town of pink-skinned strangers
and girls with white kicking
teeth. Her grand daughter her
enkel kind is a coloured. Try
not to colour outside the
lines. Distorted shadow
visiting from across the
Atlantic?

shop together in downtown Herborn fruit salami crusty buns
oma and her *enkel kind* her blue eyes my brown arms under a
cobble-stoned sun. Introduces me to her friends as *mein*
enkelkind

the charged and hidden wires
in faded skins and knitted
skirts
polite teeth edged brown
gums tea-rose pink fling grit

oma shields me with her smell
freshly-painted wood of her staircase
her photographs of the ripening family tree:
German fathers and mothers in
black and white taped above our
Canadian Kodak-coloured faces
mein enkel kinder

The blue veins in her hands cupped around my face her breath
smells of salami of fresh-painted wood

*

Remember that kaffee klatsch without oma with my aunt
related strictly only just through marriage bleating clone
friends their eyes *just curious* chink my teeth on white on
white china *curious* woman who stares untares but stares
when she thinks my eyes closed I look *just curious* deep into
my bitter coffee
reflection of my face eclipsed by her eyes. Swallow liquid
china.

In this room of china my body slathered with curious eyes.

Capture them on Kodak-coloured film.

Tourist: Parents' last words

Father's pipe smoke coils & kisses. Mother, however, prefers the privacy of parentheses because she can wear her house coat there:

(Just what in the hell's your
problem I'll either/or you
you wanna problem I'll give
you a problem I'm outta
cigarettes that's a problem
have a cuppa coffee there's
one cup left have a cup and
pass me my knitting bag while
you're up will you honey?
Thanks sweetie.

In my cuppa coffee is only me. She pokes knitting needles at the sweater in her bag. Knitting the same sleeve for five years

(Jesus I need a smoke

Duff Cake

I tried to read myself into being:

smell book crack open the binding and smell put nose in
between the pages shove nose into the crack let it travel up
and up up up around circle touch tongue tip and come away
empty. How else can I know unless I use my tongue?

Time for dessert. Time to eat myself into being:

Duff cake. Needs to be acquired. The taste (said mother)
needs to be acquired. You probably wouldn't like it with
those Canadian taste buds used to nachos and American beer.

(you eat what you are and then pop you eat yourself pop into
thin air. Mother once said you can't eat yourself I chewed
off my cuticles the bits of flesh hanging on the insides of
my cheeks. I proved her wrong then. I can prove her wrong
now.)

Duff cake. I would acquire it. Pick it from a tree most
likely. Would set it out on a made-in-China plate with a
Japanese fork and a glass of milk (would it be too much to
make it breast) and the taste would be there it would have
to be there next to the acquired German blood sausage and

yesterday's falafel sandwich.

How could you not have a taste for yourself? How could you not like yourself?

Would I taste better with chopsticks?

*

I tell my mother I am writing and eating about duff cake.

What is that? she asks. What
do you know about duff cake?

She goes back to eating her dinner. Made-in-Japan fork in
and out of her cheeks. Tongue twined around the tines.
Tense.

My only protection is that I have never tasted it. Maybe
this is my only problem. Now I will never touch it with my
tongue. Never know the insides of my mother's cheeks.

Eat her country alive.

Conch Pizza

There is only one photograph and the head the hat is torn off.

Q: Who is this woman?

A: She was my mother's mother she lives in a black leather box. You never knew her she died before you were the size of a melanin dot.

The photo says DO NOT TOUCH PLEASE ASK FOR ASSISTANCE
FRAGILE DO NOT HANDLE HANDLE HANDLE handle. Pull the handle.
Could you pull the handle please. It is kept in the bottom
drawer of the black leather jewel case with casino tokens
palm trees grains of sand milk teeth of children a
photograph flake curl crumble into

grains of sand?

milk teeth? (even then I was putting my tongue all over
everything)

Conch pizza floating somewhere between Miami and Toronto.
Fabbo jet flight from the Bahamas conch pizza hidden in a
tub full of dirty baby diapers hidden she ate it (ooh)
probably in front of me. Did I have a taste was I allowed a
taste or would I have spat it out (click honey click) or
eaten it on Alberta toast with Ontario cheese on top? Maybe
barfed it in front of customs officers looking for cocaine-
filled condoms. Or smuggled conch.

Circling over Toronto in a tub full of shitty baby diapers.
Open wide baby open WIIIDE

Bahamas '92

1. Colour Blindness

Feet slap airport tarmac

she and mother arrive amid a panic-cluster of Americans
her teeth grin rosy-lipped Colgate and air-sickness bags
eyes circled by jet lag sun-glassed over by Shoppers' Drug
Mart special \$14.99.

Even though she is from Calgary, Alberta
she is mistaken for a native of Tulsa, Oklahoma.
Stars and Stripes and Maple Leafs forever.

To you with love from the land of either/or

either white or non-white the issue
for her is black and white. North
American skin is white and then
there're the nons
she belongs to the nons
her mind and throat speak only
uneven checkerboard patterns in
black and white film
she's learned to play the game with
consummate skill.

She pushes sunglasses up higher on her nose, then faints
prey to the sudden heat and humidity a sudden blinding
absence of white and the milling rainbow of skin colours
scattered across shining tarmac.

She has glimpsed the slash
between either/or

her skin begins to eat the sun

(cockroach nibbles unseen
a cocktail peanut fallen from her bag.
Part of the insect Welcome Wagon.
Welcome.)

Mother slaps her cheeks awake

2. An albino pit bull lives next door

Patter of palm tree leaves sounds rain on concrete
sees her first giant cockroach
its abdomen cracked under her uncle's shoe its head crushed
under her mother's book its sweeping antennae still wave
hello
spit-warm water from the tap tastes of salt of sweat
walls crawl geckos and banana trees snakes
her body drips and smells of ocean
pigments sprout sweat-flowers
her hair frizzes undone

During breakfast she eyes White Girl, the albino pit bull
next door, over a bowl of Cheerios. White Girl resents the
barbed wire fence that separates them but eats yesterday's
leftover snapper and grits without complaining. Last week
she ate the head off a newborn puppy and let out a long,
squeaky belch. Welcome, she said, aware a stranger was
coming to town. Welcome.

3. Skin fruit

According to her younger cousin there are as many skin colours as soda flavours:

Black, chocolate, bright, mango-skinned, yellow, high yellow, white

You, he points at her with a chocolate finger, are mango-skinned.

You, she points at him with her fork, are full of crap.

No, points someone else, she's yellow.

What are you talking about? yelps White Girl, look at her scalp under her hair she's white she's white she's white (White Girl goes back to gnawing the rat she found under the porch)

She revels in coloured categories, eats chocolate with mango-skinned fingers, mangos with yellow fingers, slurps with brown lips Goombay punch at Burger King, snapper and conch for dinner. Cheerios, Pop Tarts and grits with sardine salad for breakfast with coffee that after-tastes of ocean

She sees in colours

Her skin, her mother's family, a garden dropping fruit

4. Colour Blind

Don't keep thinking in colours, says her mother rubbing
bright chocolate skin with cold, white cream.

Why can't you just see people?

mother's light blue gown matches the sheets
mother's bright untanned feet slide into her side of the
bed:

snores cricket whistle and bubble

mother's many colours safe and smooth

on her side she thinks of white tourists skin colour of
paper burnt with red crayon snarling dollar signs hair
stringy from the humidity
the wealthy unwashed attended by dark-skinned waiters
(what means "bright"?)

then her new found skin of flowers of flavours

How can you expect me not to think in colours? she
answers the crickets, I only knew two colours
before

(question freezes
itself into silence
into air-conditioner
rattle into bubbles
of her mother's
snores)

her skin sheds blue petals

5. Hair Politics

RCB Bone Strait Relaxer System: her hair limp soft straight
she's not allowed to wash it for a week

A miracle! exclaims her cousin
Yesterday your hair was black and today it's beautiful!

beautiful straight hair leaks oil acid chemicals as long as
it's beautiful as long as it isn't black but stringy
straight and
white

she tries to avoid thinking in
colours as she was told to do
different colours of black
hair trust RCB Bone Strait
Relaxer System to pound out
black hair replace it with
paper skin paper cuts

in the ocean sea water fingers the ends of her hair
don't get it wet that beautiful hair cost fifty American
dollars
forget colours remember beauty

she jumps half-hearted to
avoid waves salt water
splashes into her mouth sea
pries open her lips pulls her
heels her toes under sand
shifts sea sees her new white
hair

RCB Bone Strait Relaxer System slicks caught in the reefs
straightens out sea weed her hair springs shouts her own

sea runs fingers
through her hair
through her hair

she bubbles to the surface whole-hearted

6. Her skin prickles snow

she remembers snow

weaves quilts embroiders

February thoughts into a parka around her neck

cloth of bougainvilleas & hibiscus

blossoms sea weed trim

she sips more Goombay punch

wipes sweat and sea water from her forehead

(White Girl and

gecko corpses

scattered under

snow drifts)

her breath comes out white clouds

4. Scalps

Scalps

As shown by its importance in witch-charms and in the mutual exchange of talismans between lovers, hair was usually viewed as the repository of at least part of the soul.

-- Barbara G. Walker

*The Woman's Encyclopedia of
Myths and Secrets*

The closed blinds block out the early morning sunlight, but it's still too warm in here. This room smells of sleeping, sweaty, angry body. I twine a clump of my hair around the index finger of my left hand and pull. It is easy to lose myself this way. Like flicking a switch. Twine my hair around a finger and my head flushes vacuum clean, ready for new thoughts. Robert hates it when I do this. He calls it my bimbo look and says it makes my hair look stupid.

Robert. The man I am going to marry.

Yesterday when I spoke to him on the phone, my insides were glossy, mirrored bubbles ready to sail into his arms. Yesterday I knew who he was and it mattered to me that he was on the other side of the country -- he is my husband-to-be, the father of the child I want to have some day soon. But today he is someone else. I am thinking I should have the locks on the front door changed. But change sounds like hope and I am all alone while he is with someone

else. Touching her the way he is only supposed to touch his wife. Fucking her.

I don't have proof, tangible proof, the kind you can hold in your hand and squeeze for ripeness, measure with a ruler. But I dreamed she was here, tucked into his mouth with her hair flowing out between his I-love-you lips. I dreamed it long and straight and yellow, a cascade of hair poking out where his tongue should have been, a thick curtain between us while he kissed and licked my sweat. I smelled her perfumed shampoo, mingled with his suddenly alien smell of unwashed Robert hair, of semen.

My own hair forms wild tumbleweeds when I clean it from my comb. I struggle to brush it after a shower and strands gather and curl into hard, black, frizzy little balls and nest in corners under the bathroom sink, behind the stove in the kitchen, between the cushions on the sofa. First thing in the morning, it rises like hairy flames from my head and the broken ends scatter all over my pillow. I brush it down and tame it with water and hair-spray, and gather it up in a small, tight bun at the back of my head. Or I braid it so hard and so smooth it's a black, rippled skin covering my skull.

Robert doesn't like my hair no matter how I style it -- the colour and texture are not like the hair of the women he normally looks at. Their hair is soft and falls in tendrils down the backs of their necks, along their cheeks, across

their foreheads. I have tried tendrils, I have burnt my scalp with chemical straighteners and scarred myself with hot irons and pins, but my hair remains my own. Even for love it won't do what he wants. When we make love he rarely touches it. Making love. Is that what he does? He probably likes to run her tendrils through his mouth, between his lips, drape them over his face. Maybe he washes her hair, spreads his fingers under her head and massages her soapy scalp, then slowly rinses her with cool, clean water. He is meticulous but gentle when he combs it, untangles the hairs around her face. They lie down together, he spreads the strands over his body like a fan, and he purposely tangles his penis in it.

I twine a clump first on one side, then a clump on the other. I want my fingers to know every strand. I want to flick myself on with every switch. I need new thoughts. I would like new, unpolluted skin. There is still outraged sweat in my armpits and one of my breasts has slipped out from under the cloth of my night dress. Unaroused, the nipple is soft and dark brown -- a pudding dropped from a cone-shaped mould. Her nipples are pink. A pink woman to go with her yellow hair and that flowery shampoo.

The small of my back and the crack between my buttocks are still slippery with dream sweat. There is no leftover pain from my dream; I was only surprised that yellow hair travelled over my body in places only Robert has been.

But who knows what Robert told her about me. My hair is rough and short and black and it takes time and patience to comb it. He has never really touched it; he doesn't even look at it except to point out how unruly it is and how nice it could be if I got it straightened more efficiently. He has always been disappointed with my hair and he will never love me the way I am. I wonder why he is with me.

Robert. His own body ages before its time -- the beginning of a pot belly, a rapidly receding hairline and a bald patch starting at the back of his head. The skin revealed by the disappearing hair is a dull ping-pong-ball white, greasy and smooth. He is practically my husband, and it doesn't matter that he is going bald, that he will be as bald and paunchy as his father and his mother's father by age forty. Up until last night, what he looked like didn't matter.

I remove my heart with my free hand from below the uncovered breast, from beneath the cotton of my dress, and lay it on the night table. It stops beating almost immediately and the red and purple fade into a dull grey. Body parts are easier to remove than thoughts. Flick on a switch.

It's someone he works with. Or someone from his fitness club. I should care more, but there are shampoo suds instead of blood in my veins. And I am hot, this room is hot and thick with my odour. If I were pregnant I would rip out my

stomach, my polluted and unloved flesh with my bare hands, dig out a steaming hole with my nails and throw it, legs and arms and cord, at his face. Would he want a baby who looked like me, had hair like mine? I have gone too far with this thought.

I twine some more hair, this time near the top of my skull.

I pull until it hurts. I pull until I am drawing blood. The phone rings, once, twice, over and over again. I know it's Robert, giving me my long-distance, good morning kiss like he promised he would.

"You gonna be awake when I call?"

"Of course, if you want me to. I'll set the alarm."

"No. Forget the alarm. You stay asleep. I want to wake you up with a great big, sloppy telephone kiss."

His dry lips and sloppy, wet tongue. His mouth is big enough to swallow half my face if he opens it wide enough. He's never learned how to kiss, he swallows instead of kissing -- digests my skin with his saliva and then eats it. The last ring echoes. I should have answered it. A telephone kiss from the man I'm going to marry. I take my fingers from my hair, look over at the night table, at my drying heart; I'll have to put that someplace safe.

The numbers on the digital clock show I'm going to be late for work. I roll over and snuggle my face into his pillow, the blankets and sheets twisted tightly around my

waist and legs. His smell. Strands of hair caught in the fabric of the pillow case -- I pull them out one by one and lay them across my tongue. Close my lips on them. His fingertips scorched by my hair -- my hair a bright black bonfire.

AFTERWORD

[N]o matter what position [a woman of colour who writes] decides to take, she will sooner or later find herself driven into situations where she is made to feel she must choose between three conflicting identities. Writer of colour? Woman writer? Or woman of colour? Which comes first? Where does she place her priorities?

--Trinh T. Minh-ha

*Woman, Native, Other: Writing,
Postcoloniality and Feminism*

Although this thesis does not deal specifically with the writing woman of colour, it does attempt to examine the various "categories of reality" (Lionnet 18) in patriarchal discourse that force members of a marginalised group to "choose" and prioritize an "identity." By "realities" I mean the binary, either/or, "mutually exclusive categories" (Lionnet 18) that divide the powered from the disempowered, the privileged from the less privileged, on the bases of class, race, sex or sexual preference. Because of my own position as a woman of colour who writes, the connection between the politics of form and the politics of voice and "identity" have always interested me. My own understanding and experience is that the categorization of a person as part of one "identity" or more leads only to a fractured,

incomplete understanding and misrepresentation of what it is to belong to a particular marginalised group or groups. *Chimaera Lips* is my investigation of the links between form, voice and "identity" in an attempt to understand and, consequently, resist the undermining effects of categorization.

Adherence to rigid and limited categorization generally results only when an "identity," such as race, sex or sexual orientation is underlined by its comparison to another "identity"--specifically, its binarial opposite. Context plays a key role in determining what "priorities" to "choose" or what "identity" to assume. In a racist context, for instance, race will be emphasized before any other characteristics (such as sex or sexual preference). But racism and sexism, like other "identities," cannot be considered mutually exclusive, especially in cases where an individual belongs to two or more binary "categories."

Far more interesting than writing that merely attacks or reflects patriarchal discourse, is the writing that occurs on the "borderline" (Lionnet 18), or the spaces between. A proactive approach to categorization would not rely on having to distinguish oneself through comparison to another group, but would emphasize the whole or merged self, rather than the categorized self. Emphasis on race and sex could be present, but not as a response to prejudice or as a

reaction to the imposed comparison to another group. Theresa De Lauretis, in "The Technology of Gender," suggests the necessity of being able to distinguish "women from Woman" (2). The same applies to distinguishing the self from any imposed category--in this thesis the female voices in the text inhabit the spaces between races as multiracial people (specifically Black and White European). In racial terms, miscegenation is a powerful example of the merging of "realities" or binaries, and the people of mixed race who result from interracial unions are uniquely positioned because they belong to both parent races or cultures although they may not be completely accepted by one or either group.

The multiracial person is in a position that is simultaneously inside and outside or between specific racial or cultural groups. She potentially has access to both parent cultures, but is also outside these cultures because of her mixed heritage. She is perceived as belonging to a minority group, but at the same time she can assume the vision of the more powerful group. The multiracial person cannot be easily categorized or dismissed because of her double presence, her place both within and without "reality":

Multiracial people are . . . profoundly disturbing to a racist society. Not only do we stand as

evidence of the possibility of racial intimacy; if significant numbers of people can't be categorized, then our existence threatens to overthrow the categories themselves. (Gonzales 24)

Chimaera Lips is meant to illustrate the differences between voices whose points of commonality are racial heritage and biological sex. This is why the texts may not seem to follow a single, developing voice. I want to examine *difference* and the fallacy behind the assumption that all members of a certain group, marginalised or otherwise, are the same and that one member of that group could be considered representative.

Through an auto-fictive, written exploration of existence between "realities," this thesis attempts to interrogate, perhaps even collapse, the binaries surrounding perceptions of race, gender and sexuality by investigating the "borderlines" or middle spaces between "realities." I do not mean to imply that there should be a reversal or complete subversion of the binarial system because this would simply re-establish another system also based on exclusivity and privilege. A better solution would be an absorption or transformation of the present "realities" by the middle spaces so that the "realities" become part of the middle spaces and neither dominates.

The act of seeing can be both an active and a

passive one depending on who is seeing ("I") and who is being seen or potentially objectified ("she"). In my experience, writing as a "she" carries much less power and presumption than writing as an "I." The collecting and merging of the various "realities" in *Chimaera Lips* do not show a complete representation by any means, but give a three-dimensionality to the person who is, simultaneously, a woman, Black as well as many other "identities."

I deliberately chose the prose poem form because it seemed appropriate that a mixed medium be used to investigate the "mixed" spaces or gaps between "realities." In general, I am wary of the classification of texts into specific genres because the labelling of a text as either "poetry" or "prose" can potentially bias a reader's expectations of, and alter her investment in, a text in terms of her "understanding" choices in form and content.

Chimaera Lips is organized in four sections: "I am embarrassed by the sounds my body makes," "Nipple Gossip," "Eating my mother's country" and "Scalps." Each section examines different aspects of and the connections between the politics of race and racism, as well as sex and sexuality--particularly how gender can be rooted and constructed by external and/or internal sources. The poem "Hymen Legends," for instance, examines how failure to conform to societal and external ideals of the feminine can affect how an individual sees and understands her own

personhood. To have divided the sections so that each would deal exclusively with the different and decidedly limited aspects of what allegedly constitutes the "woman of colour," that is race and sex/gender, would have defeated my purpose of demonstrating how destructive and confining "realities" are. Rigid sectioning or division of the content would have implied that sex and race are mutually exclusive of each other and that a person is either one or the other, but never both simultaneously. The sections are meant to overlap in terms of content as each section progresses so that there is a gradual collapse and merging of the categories of race and sex/gender. For example, as a section, "Nipple Gossip" begins ostensibly as an exploration of the categories of sex and sexuality, but towards its final poems, it also examines race, and how race and sexuality are or can be linked as in the poems "Understand" and "Skinned."

The fourth section, "Scalps," is a synthesis of all the issues of race and sex addressed in the first three sections. "Scalps" is more prose-bound than the other texts because it represents a more prosaic investigation of middle spaces, whereas the preceding texts are more of a poetic investigation in terms of physical space or page placement and language experimentation of the spaces. I do not intend "Scalps" to be a "traditional" short story, but deliberately include more poetic, or loaded, language and images so that it can be both poem and short story. Where the other texts

are prose poetry, "Scalps" is poetic prose. "Scalps" also concludes *Chimaera Lips* with opening rather than closure by its difference in texture and form. Closure in this case would be a falsification of the issues brought up in the text as it would imply solution or completion.

During the writing of this thesis, I kept in mind the possibility of how "language predetermines perception" (Lionnet 14) in the areas of racism and sexism, and of language's potential role as a "colonise[r]" (134 Brossard), since I was concerned from the very beginning that my own writing might be unconsciously "colonised." One way I resisted being colonised was through the direct investigation of potentially racist or sexist language and ideas. Trying to find language that would describe Black beauty, for example, was especially challenging because there are so few ways of referring to or describing Black features without using White-centred, and ultimately racist, terminology. I addressed this problem in "Scalps" as well as in the "Bahamas '92" series in "Eating my mother's country." I also resisted being "colonised" through genre blurring-- while the poetic writing experiments with language, the text still remains within the prose arena. Genre blurring lets me see how the discourse of the "accessible" can be manipulated to work for the discourse of the marginalised or the Other.

Part of my attempt to make *Chimaera Lips* more accessible was the inclusion of humour and orality in the prose poem

texts. The humour in these texts is meant to provide an avenue for the reader who is less familiar with the realities of racism and sexism to approach the texts without immediately being overwhelmed by the potentially volatile nature of these issues. The texts are also written to be read aloud. Irregular punctuation and disrupted syntax are meant to reflect spoken and, therefore, more familiar language.

This thesis has a multiple or compound or simultaneous vision of what it is to be part of many groups, marginalised or otherwise. Once categories or rigid "realities" are eliminated, there will no longer be silencing or the Other or the marginalised or the ghettoized. What needs to be acknowledged, especially at this time of change when previously silenced voices are starting to be heard and so many differences are emerging, is the importance of all voices and experiences.

Although more attention is being paid to writing by members of marginalised groups, there is still the potential for dismissal and silencing of this writing in the form of ghettoization. The division of writing into the categories of "Other" and the "Centre" is far too polarised and limiting. As long as these categories remain in place, writing by members of marginalised groups will be interpreted only as reactive and marginalised. In order for these Centre/Other distinctions to be invalidated,

however, the "disturbing" middle spaces need to be found and established. *Chimaera Lips* marks these spaces and, without categorizing and limiting the many voices of the Chimaera's heads that are race, sex, sexual preference and even genre, gives a context where differences can be articulated without destroying the entire beast.

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